



Resource Bulletin

North Fork Homesteads

The Pre-Park Era

European settlement predated Glacier National Park. The North Fork Valley in particular attracted pioneers, including Butte's famous copper king, Marcus Daly, who financed an expedition to search for oil prospects along the North Fork of the Flathead River in 1885. Eight years later in 1893, the Great Northern Railway completed its transcontinental line from St. Paul, Minnesota to the West Coast via Marias Pass, providing a nearby connection for the settlers of the North Fork Valley to sell resources to a national market.

When USGS surveyors mapped the North Fork Valley, they estimated it held 59 square miles of potential agricultural meadows. With abundant wildlife, minerals, timber, fresh water, and the potential of coal and oil, the North Fork Valley began to experience rapid development. The discovery of oil seeps around Kintla Lake prompted the Butte Oil Company to clear a 40 mile wagon road (now the inside North Fork Road) through the forest in 1901. It was sufficient for moving industrial machinery, but difficult for residents. Ungraded and filled with tree stumps, rocks, and washouts, the road took settlers two days to make the trip from Belton (now West Glacier) to Polebridge.

This wagon road encouraged settlement on the east side of the Flathead River. In 1904, William Adair opened a mercantile on the new road in Sullivan Meadow, south of Logging Creek. By 1910, 44 homesteads flourished on the east side



North Fork residents Johnnie and Harriet Walsh at their homestead in 1909

of the valley. Sullivan Meadow and Big Prairie supported the largest populations, but homesteads occupied the surrounding drainages – Quartz Creek, Akokala Creek, and Bowman Creek.

On May 11, 1910, Congress designated Glacier National Park. The North Fork of the Flathead River served as the park's western boundary. Due to a provision within the Glacier National Park Act, which stated "That nothing herein contained shall affect any valid existing claim..." the 44 east side homesteads were now private inholdings within Glacier National Park.

Two years after the founding of Glacier National Park, an improved road was constructed from Columbia Falls up the west side of the North Fork Valley.

With a new road and fewer regulations, homesteads on the west side, outside of the park, became more popular. William Adair saw this trend and moved his mercantile west of the river, making the town of Polebridge, and the west side, the cultural hub of the North Fork Valley.

Management Concerns

In 1912, every homesteader on the east side of the river signed a petition requesting that the North Fork Valley be removed from the park's boundaries. They felt that the poor quality of the wagon road and the prohibition of new settlers were major detriments to their progress. The petition states, "We submit that it is more important to furnish homes to a land-hungry people than

to lock the land up as a rich man's playground." Park Superintendant Logan responded by saying, "Instead of giving up any land there I think we should take steps to obtain more land; in fact get rid of every settler on the North Fork of the Flathead River."

This was a stark difference in land use policy between the U.S. Forest Service, the previous land managers, and the National Park Service (NPS). The Forest Service had helped to improve roads, foster development, and had permitted hunting, trapping, and logging; all those activities were now prohibited under the jurisdiction of Glacier National Park. Inholders felt that the NPS had an unofficial policy of trying to extinguish private property title.

After the Half Moon Fire of 1929, Congress appropriated nearly \$200,000 to acquire private property within Glacier National Park's boundary. The NPS offered to buy the properties of east side residents at half of the value and insisted that all of the owner's property must be sold in a single package. A lump sum of money was very attractive during the Great Depression, but the residents protested that the offers were too low. Even so, many felt



Adair Mercantile – opened in 1904 in Sullivan Meadow (east side of river) and moved to Polebridge in 1913

they had no choice but to sell.

The NPS received a large Congressional appropriation in the 1950s. They used the funding to acquire more inholder property. With each property that they purchased they removed the evidence of the homestead, returning the land to its natural state. By 1954, there were no year-round residents living on the east side of the North Fork Valley.

Contemporary Status

In 1986, historian Patricia Bick, conducted extensive research on the homesteads in the North Fork. She interviewed old time residents, reviewed newspaper articles, and researched previous reports written on the North Fork homesteads. Bick's study describes the historic patterns, social history, economics, and architectural history of the early settlers in the North Fork Valley. Her report, titled "Homesteading on the North Fork in Glacier National Park," resulted in the listing of seven North Fork homesteads in the National Register of Historic Places. (Three of the listed homesteads were destroyed in the 1988 Red Bench Fire.)

The homesteads, as archeological sites, captured the interest of archeologist Douglas McDonald from the University

of Montana. Beginning in the summer of 2008, McDonald's team of undergraduate archeologists inventoried approximately 40 homestead sites. Their inventory work included recording accurate site descriptions and conditions of the sites, identifying potential threats to the integrity of each site, and evaluating them for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. This inventory has enhanced the historical knowledge of the early settlers in the North Fork Valley.

Glacier's Management Strategy

It's important to the park and its visitors that the history of the North Fork settlers is not forgotten. The historical and archeological research documenting the personalities and lifeways of these pioneers now informs interpretive exhibits and programs offered to park visitors. One recently installed exhibit, located at the site of the original Jeremiah and Margaret McCarthy cabin, highlights the experience of the McCarthy's and other adventurous homesteaders who once called the North Fork home.

Hopefully by understanding the lives and dreams of those that once met the challenge of life in the wilderness, contemporary park visitors will be inspired to support and appreciate the long-term preservation and stewardship of these rare historical resources.



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RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Documents and web sites

Community Webpage for North Fork Landowners:
<http://www.nflandowners.com/index.html>

Montana National Register of Historic Places:
<http://www.mhs.mt.gov/shpo/nationalreg.asp>

Website Dedicated to the North Fork River:
<http://www.gravel.org/>

Homesteading on the North Fork in Glacier National Park. Patricia Bick.